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REMAKING BANDUNG SIXTY YEARS ON

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This Communication Article proposes that if the Bandung Spirit is to be revived in the twenty-first century, then this will necessitate an appreciation in the first instance of how different the world is today from conditions 60 years ago – both across the Global South but also, more particularly, in the West. The key shift may have been one from an assertive imposition of rule based on a clarity of vision and purpose, to a more insecure and reactive form of engagement that lacks direction. This latter seeks to compensate for an absence of meaning behind forms of procedural risk management. It will be the ability of the former colonies to put forward a direction that captivates all, based on transcending the past and presenting coherent human values rather than mere economic might that will determine the future.

The Cold War context

The Bandung Conference 60 years ago was the first significant gathering of leaders of Asian and African states. They met with a view to formulating an agenda for the world to meet their own needs, as opposed to those of their former colonial masters. On the occasion of this anniversary others – no doubt – will reflect upon their consequent declaration, actions and legacy. My purpose here is somewhat different – it is to highlight the extent to which the context for any renewed solidarities has altered – as to only understand those nations directly concerned is to appreciate little of the broader circumstances and potential for change today.

Sixty years is on a par with a human life – it appears eminently comprehensible. But, as the novelist L.P. Hartley wrote in the opening line to his novel *'The Go-Between'* – a work published just two years prior to the Bandung Conference – which also reminisces about mediating the relations of others over a similar period: *'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'*.¹ It is maybe this that we should note the most as we examine the opportunities to strengthen cooperation and reshape destinies for the Global South.

In 1955, many of the senior statesmen who attended the Bandung Conference represented newly independent and, accordingly, optimistic and confident nations. These were great leaders – irrespective of their outlooks and impacts – simply through their having been forged by the process of the struggle for independence. The list of those in attendance included Sukarno, Nehru, Nasser and Zhou Enlai. Other influential figures, such as Nkrumah and Ho Chi Minh, kept abreast of developments and were to be central to the nascent Non-Aligned Movement. They were remarkable leaders whose names command a modicum of respect to this day.

But these aspirational and inspirational figures also faced an assertive and confident West that was waging a global war against communism, even if many of those it tarred with the label were nothing

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¹ Leslie Poles Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).

of the sort. The United States in particular had been propelled to the position of world hegemon as the old European powers had effectively destroyed each other through the Second World War.² Its authority on the world stage went from being incidental to instrumental, but it was also increasingly shaped through Cold War paranoia.

There is an old African proverb which proposes that: '*When two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers*'³ – and the young, hopeful grass of the Global South certainly did suffer as a consequence of the circumstances. Leaders across the world were co-opted by the West to fight the Cold War on its behalf or they were brutally rejected and opposed. Some sought to insulate themselves from the destabilizing effects of such external political pressures by aligning themselves accordingly to anti-communism.⁴

So, despite the fine words expressed at that original Bandung Conference, many nations soon found themselves on a long and bloody detour that some of their leaders today might prefer to forget. That is why we continue to refer above all to the 'Bandung Spirit' rather than to the specificities of the associated declaration and its impact. It is an implicit recognition that this moment represented an unmet set of ambitions. Youthful optimism had failed to make its mark, and there may accordingly be some unfinished business to revisit.

But '*the past is another country*', and we must start by recognizing how different the situation is in the world today. The Cold War ended in the period between 1989 and 1991 – from the dismantling of the Berlin Wall to the eventual implosion of the Soviet Union. It is the impact and legacy of this that we need to understand – and particularly its effects upon the Western imagination – if we are truly to appreciate the potential opportunities and challenges presenting themselves today to any who might hope to create a coherent and united alternative.

A confused West

The Cold War provided a degree of moral purpose and direction to the West. Among many other elements, this period witnessed relatively large sums of capital being directed to and invested in the Global South as part of a concerted propaganda campaign designed to show that the market system worked. Some of this coincided with the West's own optimism in this period – such as efforts in development and healthcare to build infrastructure and fight disease.⁵

Hospitals were built and some scourges – like smallpox and polio – were eradicated, although the failure to wipe-out malaria, coinciding with an economic slow-down in the West and a concomitantly more pessimistic period, also led to suggestions that problems would not be solved simply by throwing money at them. Accordingly, the 1980s emerged as a 'lost decade' for old-style development and this evolved into the supposedly 'sustainable' focus of the 1990s that also witnessed the rise of less tangible (and fungible) indicators, such as 'well-being'.⁶

Once the Cold War ended, interest in the development of the Global South appeared to stop suddenly. In many ways, this was just as disruptive as the earlier period of intervention. Most extant leaders lost

² Tom Kemp, *The Climax of Capitalism: The US Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1990).

³ See, for instance, <http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-proverb-of-the-month/27-2001proverbs/172-nov2001.html> (accessed May 17, 2016).

⁴ Lee Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵ Vanessa Pupavac, 'Changing Concepts of International Health', in *A Sociology of Health*, ed. D. Wainwright (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 173–90.

⁶ Suan Ee Ong and Bill Durodié, 'Development and Health in Southeast Asia from the Cold War to the Present', *NTS Alert*, no. 2 (2011): 1–7.

their authority as relations of patronage came to an end. Many had effectively been compromised by these. But a new – domestic – form of dependency now emerged. One that was beholden to the needs of capital, rather than anti-communism.⁷ As the focus shifted from politics to business, so the potential for corruption increased through the pursuit of government largesse in the form of contracts, permits and licences.

Interest in these regions from the West only began to be renewed subsequent to the events of 9/11 and then largely on a piecemeal basis, lacking strategic direction and coordination.⁸ And, as some commentators have noted, aside from being highly reactive, much of this could be argued to be more about allowing Westerners to feel good about themselves than about resolving any actual problems elsewhere.⁹

It is a moot point to ask whether the Global South was better served by overly confident and assertive powers, such as the United States, which tried to shape the world in their own image or, as is the case now, by confused and uncertain actors that react nervously to world events, without having a clear sense of purpose or direction. Either way, one might presume, the ‘grass’ of the Global South might continue to suffer.

The end of the Cold War was portrayed as a period of opportunity for the West.¹⁰ However, it was also to generate new problems as the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, understood full well when she briefed President Gorbachev in private meetings that the lifting of the Iron Curtain and German reunification would; ‘*undermine the stability of the whole international situation and could endanger our security*’.¹¹

For over 40 years the world had largely been divided between two competing ideologies – a socialist East and a free-market West. The division extended beyond the protagonists themselves to include their satellite states and supporters in Eastern Europe and across the rest of the globe. It was also reflected internally in a split between broadly left-leaning parties and a more centrist or conservative right. Accordingly, it was a division that also shaped and defined identities and culture.¹²

Those who disputed the state of affairs in the West were often advised to go and live in Moscow. Elsewhere, as in the Global South, they might be met with a more violent riposte. But what impact would it have on the protagonists once Moscow also became part of the capitalist system? Fukuyama’s ‘*end of history*’ thesis,¹³ and Thatcher’s dictum that ‘*there is no alternative*’,¹⁴ were hardly uplifting or inspiring. Where were those who still believed in progress to go?

⁷ Jones, ASEAN.

⁸ Tara McCormack, ‘Human Security and the Separation of Security and Development’, *Conflict, Security and Development* 11, no.2 (2011): 235–60.

⁹ Brendan O’Neill, ‘Bomb Syria so that I Can Sleep at Night’, *Spiked-Online* (2012), <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/12240> (accessed May 17, 2016).

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, Summer (1989), <http://ps321.community.uaf.edu/files/2012/10/Fukuyama-End-of-history-article.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2016).

¹¹ Cited in ‘Mr. Gorbachev, Keep this Wall up!’, *The Economist*, September 11, 2009, http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2009/09/mr_gorbachev_keep_this_wall_up (accessed May 17, 2016).

¹² Kenneth McLaughlin, *Surviving Identity: Vulnerability and the Psychology of Recognition* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹³ Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’.

¹⁴ Margaret Thatcher made the phrase her own but it was adopted from the nineteenth century classic liberal thinker Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: Or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1851).

The market might add value. But it has little to say about values – in the moral sense. It is this more human dimension that appears to have been by-passed or elided in recent times. And yet it is precisely the pursuit of what it is that provides our lives with meaning that remains at issue. The old right may seem to have won the economic wars, but the old left would continue to wage the culture wars in pursuit of something more to life than mere existence.

At the same time there was a need, most acutely felt by the elites, to establish a new basis for authority in the period ahead.¹⁵ In many instances, this took the form of identifying new enemies to replace the gap left by the former Soviet Union. These have included, the escalation of the War on Drugs in Central America, Saddam Hussein in Iraq (twice), General Aidid in Somalia, Slobodan Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia, the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as Al-Qaeda, both there and in Iraq, together with the so-called Islamic State group,¹⁶ to name just a few.

We should recognize that this process is primarily an unconscious one. Few officials or politicians wake up each day to reflect upon what new enemies they might find to assist them in galvanizing their populations around a shared project. Rather, it is simply something that emerges because it appears to work in a period lacking more principled political discourse and debate. Even Bill Clinton – famously elected with his domestically focused mnemonic '*It's the economy, stupid*'¹⁷ – was, in his turn, rapidly side-tracked into a futile conflict in Somalia.

It may indeed appear easier to leaders, who need to maintain their domestic legitimacy, to jet around the world stage purporting to solve problems there in the full glare of the world's media, than it is for them to address more material issues pertaining to industrial and moral decline at home. It is also the case that the media focus on their foreign interventions soon dies down and few are ever held accountable for conditions there after they have moved on – unlike at home, where any claims to efficacy would be scrutinized more closely and on a more protracted basis.

Lessons for the South?

The loss of ideology heralded by the end of the Cold War has led to a search for meaning amongst the general population and the identification of new threats by the elites.¹⁸ The latter need not always be external. The war on drugs also takes on an internal dimension and there are an increasing number of problems identified that are primarily domestic – such as the so-called war on obesity, as well as attempts to challenge anti-social behaviour.¹⁹

These latter rely on assuming and projecting a population of vulnerable individuals needing advice or protection from a benign and enlightened state. But, in that regard, this shift from focusing on security towards insecurity, or to managing behaviour may be self-defeating in the long run as the state itself is a product of assuming people to be rational agents, not imminent victims.²⁰ The search for new forms of affiliation has also enhanced the scope of identity politics which – in its turn – could also

¹⁵ Frank Furedi, *Authority: A Sociological History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ The moniker attributed to the organization variously going under the names Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – ISIL, and Arabic variations, by AFP (Agence France Presse), with a view to repudiating its claims to geography and statehood.

¹⁷ See, for instance, <https://fwcon.wordpress.com/its-the-economy-stupid/> (accessed May 17, 2016).

¹⁸ Zaki Laïdi, *Un monde privé de sens* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1994). Published in English as *A World Without Meaning: The Crisis of Meaning in International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁹ Stuart Waiton, *The Politics of Antisocial Behaviour: Amoral Panics* (London: Routledge, 2008).

²⁰ Peter Ramsay, *The Insecurity State: Vulnerable Autonomy and the Right to Security in the Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

become a race to the bottom as groups and individuals compete to identify themselves as the most victimized.²¹

Nationalism – itself a defensive posture in its historical genesis – also stands widely discredited, particularly in the West, through its association with racism and the causes of the Second World War.²² Accordingly, many have looked either to supra-national bodies – such as the UN, EU (or ASEAN and the AU in the Southeast Asian and African contexts) – or sub-national entities – like non-governmental organizations or civil society groups – as new sources of authority in the contemporary context.

The problem with these is that they readily become remote and unaccountable to ordinary people. As one Cambridge-based academic has noted, the European Union for example, reflects a shift away from the nation state that emerged as representative of and accountable to the people, to member states that pursue moral agendas determined elsewhere and who now view their domestic populations as potential problems needing to be controlled.²³

Likewise, Furedi has noted how consumer activism, despite its radical appeal, is linked to a decline in electoral engagement.²⁴ Civil society groups are readily co-opted to government agendas, often being dependent on these for their financial survival or looking to them to implement change. They are indulged by those who wish to appear radical, as well as a media that relies on presenting a supposed counter to dominant narratives. But the realities of power often force campaigners to compromise their views and adopt the agendas of others.²⁵

Some in the Global South have noted the interventionist tendencies unleashed by these elements, associated with a supposedly liberal internationalist outlook. But it would be wrong for them to presume the counter to this to be a renewed nationalism of their own that, in its turn, would serve to encourage and foment a divisive form of identity politics. The South will certainly need to look to itself to solve its own problems. But we should not confuse autonomy and agency with difference and separation. Rather, there may be a need to be both rooted and to promote a more human-oriented outlook – one that the West abandoned by its failure to see through the logic of the Enlightenment project.

Of course, throughout the post-war period many nations in the Global South emerged economically through their own efforts too – even if the ‘*swamps to skyscrapers*’ narrative of some can be shown to have been a bit of a myth.²⁶ We should not be downbeat about the past, but nor should we seek to rewrite its history. It is simply untrue that the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Germans and Italians left nothing in their wake. They left systems of law and democracy, as well as considerable infrastructures that were adopted and adapted to meet local needs. The spirit of freedom is innate to all human beings even if, through historical accident, many social, scientific and political transformations emerged from the West.

²¹ Kenan Malik, *Multiculturalism and its Discontents: Rethinking Diversity after 9/11* (London: Seagull Books, 2014).

²² James Heartfield, *An Unpatriotic History of the Second World War* (London: Zero Books, 2012).

²³ Christopher Bickerton, *European Integration: From Nation-States to Member States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ Frank Furedi, *Consuming Democracy: Activism, Elitism and Political Apathy* (unpublished essay, 1999), https://www.academia.edu/2683211/Consuming_democracy_Activism_elitism_and_political_apathy (accessed May 17, 2016).

²⁵ James Heartfield, ‘Capitalism and Anti-Capitalism’, *Interventions* 5, no.2 (2003): 271–89.

²⁶ See, for instance, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31626174> (accessed May 17, 2016) and responses such as <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/singapore-more-than-swamp-more-than-skyscrapers-031017205.html> (accessed May 17, 2016).

It would also be a mistake to confuse the Global South taking-off with any imminent desire or potential by the various parties concerned to be more assertive. It is easier to make significant advances once others have opened up the way. GDP growth rates reflect this. Putting flushing toilets into every home and even building high-speed rail lines is relatively straightforward. These also improve the quality of life. But the question remains whether the nations that benefit will be able to move beyond past achievements to a situation where they can provide greater leadership, both technical and political. That may require something else.

In his case for *The New Asian Hemisphere*, the former Permanent Secretary and Ambassador to the UN turned Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, Kishore Mahbubani, points to Asia already having the biggest and most of everything – the fastest growth rates, the largest exporters, the most foreign exchange reserves, the biggest cities, the tallest buildings, the largest infrastructure projects, the most PhDs in science and engineering and, of course, the most people.²⁷

But size – as Singapore more than most states knows – is not everything. Solving problems by maintaining an undeveloped reserve army of labour can hold a country back. It is not the same as moving forward through the advance of innovative solutions. The most remarkable aspect of Britain and America's domination of the world in each of the preceding centuries was that this was achieved with remarkably small populations – the US having fewer than 80 million people at the turn of the twentieth century, by which time it had already assumed the lead in the production of many commodities.²⁸

What the US had – and what the Global South most needs to achieve – is a coherent vision or set of values applied to diverse circumstances. America, as famously immortalized by the poet Francis Scott Key in 1814 and subsequently embedded into its national anthem, was the '*land of the free*'.²⁹ It was not the land of the safe or secure as some would appear to prioritize today. These latter were understood to emerge from being free first – free to pursue one's own project in a free market, free to believe in and worship whomever one liked and free to speak about anything. It was an inspirational value that drove it forward and that others bought into too.

It was not without reason that the Bandung Conference was held in Gedung Merdeka.³⁰ And even after the Second World War it had been the assumed neutrality of the US and its offer of liberation to the colonies that had bought it considerable good will and time there.

Sadly, it is its own confusion over the significance of its founding values that most holds the US back today.³¹ But that is a challenge that can only be addressed and resolved there. For the Global South it behoves it to pick up the baton dropped by the West – to pursue the human-centred project of freedom and development for all that was either abandoned or is now merely spoken of rhetorically by those who once advocated for and projected it.³²

²⁷ Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

²⁸ Kemp, *The Climax of Capitalism*.

²⁹ Francis Scott Key, *The Star-Spangled Banner* (1814), <http://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/the-lyrics.aspx> (accessed May 17, 2016).

³⁰ Literally 'Freedom Building' in Bahasa.

³¹ Bill Durodié, 'War on Terror or a Search for Meaning?', in *Looking Back, Looking Forward: Perspectives on Terrorism and Responses to it*, US Joint Chiefs of Staff/Department of Defense Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment White Paper (Arlington, VA, 2013), 21–30.

³² Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1961).

Whither Bandung?

To pursue projects that promote humanity rather than national identity is the gap that needs to be filled today by any purporting to recreate a Bandung Spirit. The pride of the Chinese people (and many others besides) at the opening of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 was based as much on the universal appeal of sporting excellence as on any supposed nationalism. In a similar way, whilst India continues to face profound social and economic problems today, every village schoolchild knows that it has its own space programme – unlike Britain. Indeed, far from being a diversion of resources, such ambitions – 40 years since the Americans last left the moon – both exemplify the spirit of humanity and can galvanize people into action.

The West's problems in this regard are profound. It suffers not so much from a decline as from a sense of insecurity, which it projects onto its own populations and others. It would be wrong therefore to read its actions in many instances as being narrowly cynical or hypocritical. That would be to impute too much. Rather, it is better to understand the West as being confused as to its own trajectory, history and legacy. Its own fears of freedom and progress are then attributed to external causes.

So China becomes a problem for the West, not because of China per se or old-fashioned racial ideology as would have been the case in the past, but because development and even people are problematized in general. When there are problems in China – such as a high-speed rail crash – Western commentators are quick to question the wisdom of advancing technology there. China, we are told, is doing too much, too quickly, without the necessary checks.

It would be better for China not to react in a hostile or even insecure way to such accusations. Rather, it might benefit it considerably more to be circumspect in its response – to thank Westerners for their interest and to advise them that, when they finally get around to developing and building such systems of their own, then China will always be there to offer advice when they encounter problems.

The challenge today is that – having colonized much of the Global South 150 years ago – the West would now like to recolonize its mind with presumed and projected fears about growth, the environment, lack of natural resources, and there being too many people. Notably, in this view, people are presented as problems rather than as problem-solvers. Everything is presented as a risk. And the West needs others to buy-into this agenda too – if only to hold them back and reduce whatever threat they might pose in the future.

The task for a new Bandung Spirit is not to fall for this agenda. It is to develop and promote its own narrative, based on its own needs and ambitions. To argue not about what it fears or what it is against, but for what it seeks to achieve and what it is for. This is a story that ought to be for, and appeal to, the whole of humanity – and not be exclusive to particular nations or the Global South. The trick will be to build on and transcend the limitations of the past – both technical and social.

One character who would have made a welcome addition to the original Bandung Conference but was not there was the great Caribbean writer C.L.R. James. He may be best known for his writings on cricket,³³ and that other – forgotten – revolution of the eighteenth century – the Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave uprising in history that went on to keep the colonial powers at bay.³⁴ But he was also a friend and biographer of Nkrumah,³⁵ who had been kept away from Bandung by the British but who did so much to drive the 'Bandung Spirit' on.

³³ Cyril Lionel Robert James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

³⁴ Cyril Lionel Robert James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938).

³⁵ Cyril Lionel Robert James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (Westport, CT: Allison & Busby, 1977).

James was well aware of the problems and limitations of Empire but he was also reluctant to throw out the baby with the bath water. *'I denounce European colonialism' he wrote, 'but I respect the learning and profound discoveries of Western civilisation'*, adding, *'I, a man of the Caribbean, have found that it is in the study of Western literature, Western philosophy and Western history that I have found out the things that I have found out, even about the underdeveloped countries'*.³⁶

A true Bandung Spirit for the twenty-first century would pick up the pieces nervously dropped by those who now fear change in the West and become a new beacon for all of humanity to follow. It is human civilization, human literature, human philosophy and human history that really matter. And, in that regard, our focus ought not to be whether we are for the West or the South – but simply to know what it is we are for – to establish a new humanism through Merdeka.

Notes on Contributor

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³⁶ Cited at; <https://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2012/04/16/clr-james-frantz-fanon-and-the-meaning-of-liberation/> (accessed May 17, 2016).